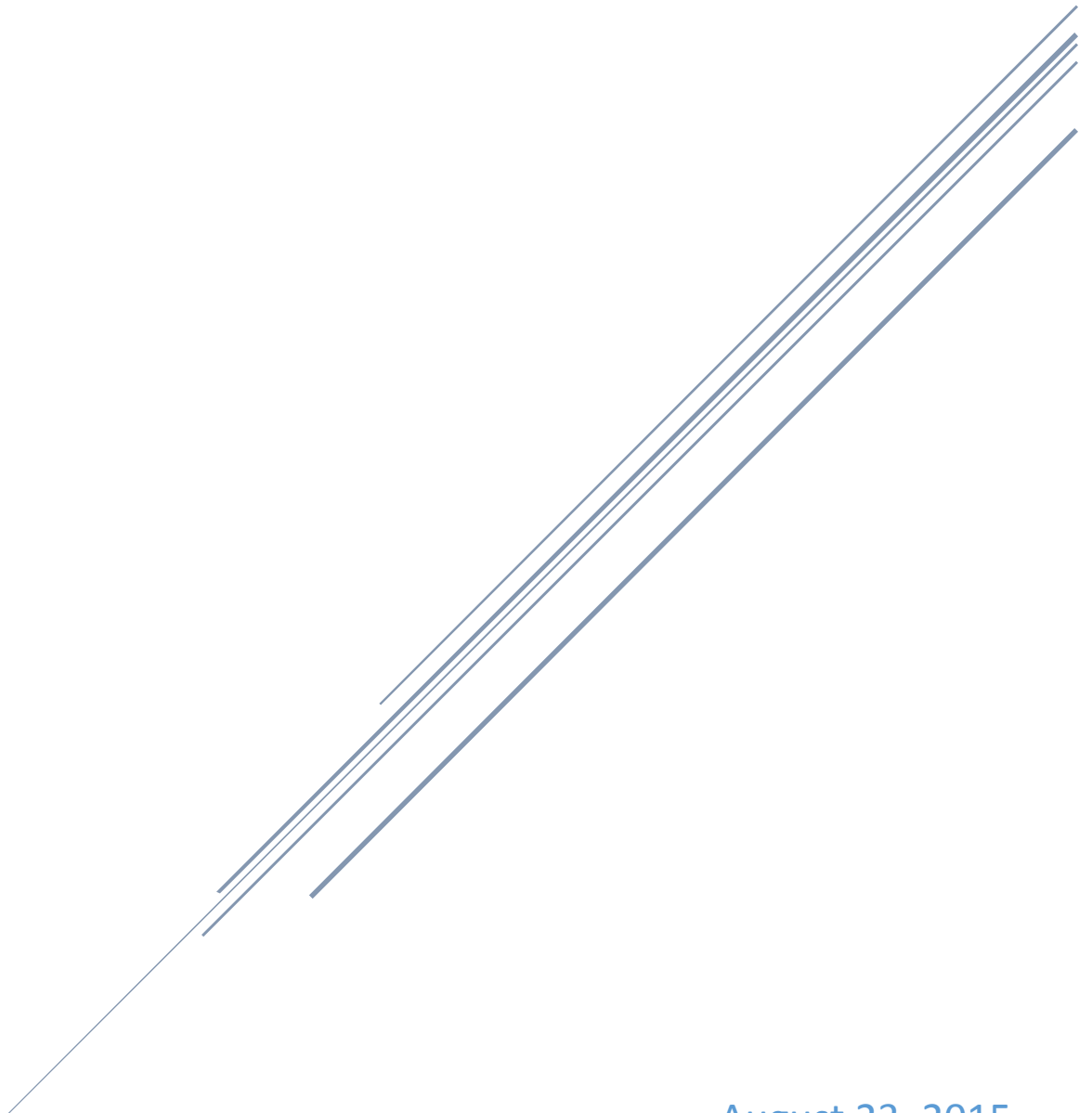


# JESUS RUINS EVERYTHING!

*John 56-69*



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Pastor Brad

When I was 18, and I graduated from high school and made the long journey from New Jersey to West Chester, PA, for college, my parents – my dad – accepted an opportunity to go work in England for 3-5 years. I know -- usually it's the kid who leaves, but my family's a little different. My parents were the ones who up and moved away!

That meant that as a dependent student, I got to fly over once a year to visit them, paid for by the company! It was fantastic! But even better, one time when I was flying back to the states after Christmas or something, I got that miraculous gift from the travel Gods – a free upgrade to 1<sup>st</sup> class. I'm not even sure they do that anymore, but I had never flown first class before – or since -- and it. Was. Awesome.

No sooner had I found my seat -- my soft, cushy, roomy, semi-private seat -- than the flight attendant handed me a moist hot washcloth to freshen up with, placed a glass – a real glass flute -- of champagne in my hand, and asked me if I wanted something else to drink. Of course I did, and when she came back with my drink, she also presented me with a menu of my dinner choices – an actual menu! And all of this was before the plane had even pulled away from the gate!

And though it seemed impossible, it only got better when we were up in the air. dinner came on REAL dishes with real silverware! Besides that, it was delicious! After dinner, they gave me my very own little bag with everything one 'needs' for luxury travel: a spare toothbrush-- with toothpaste, one of those masks to help me sleep, and little booties in case my feet got cold. And I slept. Boy, did I sleep!

Now I understood why they pull the curtain that separates first class from coach: Those of us in first class were having a totally different experience. If the people in coach knew what was happening up there, they wouldn't like it. They wouldn't like it one bit. The curtain is essential, really, because as long as the folks in coach don't see what flying first class is like, it's still possible for them to be content with their flight -- even happy. But if, for one second, they realize what they're missing, it'd be all over. One glimpse and this flight and every flight after that would be ruined -- forever.

I know it's true, because that's what happened to me. One flight in first class ruined coach for me forever. For all practical purposes, I am no longer capable of enjoying a perfectly good flight anymore! Why? Because all I'm thinking about is what I'm missing. I have seen what happens behind the mysterious curtain, my friends; and, as they say, you can't 'un-see' that!

I think this is what Peter is getting at in today's Gospel lesson. Jesus is teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, and for many of those listening, he just goes too far. When we catch up with Jesus, he has just finished saying some crazy stuff about having to eat his flesh and drink his blood if we want any hope of eternal life. Some of the people in the crowd speak up. They are having a hard time following what Jesus saying:

"This teaching is difficult," they said.

"Who can accept it?" they said.

Who indeed?! It's a perfectly understandable response; and underneath it is a perfectly reasonable request. *Just tell us what you're getting at, Jesus. Just tell us what that means. Help us to understand.*

And so Jesus, instead of explaining himself to them, instead of telling them plainly what he's talking about when he talks about eating flesh and drinking blood -- what he means when he calls himself the "bread of heaven," (and I can't help thinking that he does this on purpose) Jesus does quite the opposite. "Does this offend you?" he says. "Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?" – so not helpful!

In effect, Jesus was saying, "If you thought that eating my flesh and drinking my blood was hard to swallow, just wait – 'cuz you ain't seen nothin' yet!"

And at this, says the author, "...many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him." Are you surprised? Not me! I don't blame them. I wonder how many Jesus lost that day....

Jesus doesn't seem very surprised when they leave, either. A little hurt maybe, but not surprised. Then he turns to the twelve and asks, "Do you also wish to go away?"

And Peter, as usual, speaks right up and he says, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Now, I'm pretty sure Peter didn't say this because he understood what Jesus was talking about. As usual, he didn't have a clue any more than the rest of them did. Peter frequently missed the point of Jesus' teachings over the years, but it didn't really matter. Jesus ruined everything when it came to following anyone else, or doing anything else.

My guess is that there were plenty of times when Peter wished he could have just left and gone back to his old life. He might have even made plans. Sometimes, I wish I could go back – when I have to learn something hard or my new life as a sober pastor gets a little bit difficult. And my old life wasn't anything to write home about, that's for sure!

Let's be honest. Jesus wasn't the easiest person to get along with, let alone understand. He upset as many people as he delighted. He did things you weren't supposed to do. He said things you weren't supposed to say. He touched people you weren't supposed to touch. He forgave people you weren't supposed to forgive; and he welcomed people you weren't supposed to welcome.

And just when Peter thought that he had finally figured him out, Jesus inevitably would do or say something that made Peter wonder all over again who in the world this guy was – this guy he had sacrificed everything to follow. One minute Jesus would be blessing Peter for his insight, and the next he would be rebuking him for his ignorance (they were always rebuking each other back then!).

There's no doubt in my mind that following Jesus was exhausting, in every aspect of the word. It still is. Peter's life was a lot simpler and safer before he dropped everything to follow this rabbi. But it wasn't better. True, following Jesus was exhausting -- exasperating even -- but imagine how exhilarating it could be! And the exhilaration of being with Jesus made every exhausting, exasperating second so worth it...

I asked a friend of mine in Florida who struggled with infertility for years, what life was like for her now that she had 3 kids. At that time, they were all under 5 years old. She smiled at me, shook her head and said, "It's a terrible blessing -- Being a parent is really hard!" She went on to tell me how the hours are long, the costs are great, the worries are huge. Your life is no longer your own. Every waking moment revolves around those little dictators. And yet, I've noticed, she pays this price gladly, gratefully, -- I've never seen a happier mom!

You see, for all of the terrible demands children place on us, these demands pale in comparison to the blessing that children are to us. Kids ruin everything! But don't we somehow welcome the ruination.

That's how it is with Jesus. Like Peter, I'm not always sure I understand some of the things Jesus says. But that's not my biggest problem with him. My biggest problem with Jesus are those things he says that I do understand. Like:

- Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.
- ...if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also....
- Don't judge, so that you will not be judged.
- When Peter asks Jesus, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister.."  
Jesus says, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven<sup>[b]</sup> times"

- Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.
- “If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross” ... “and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

It's when Jesus says those things that I just want to throw up my hands and walk away. He asks too much of me he expects too much from me. Following Jesus is just too hard.

Leaving Jesus behind would make my life simpler, and so much easier. It's tempting. I have to admit that I sometimes fantasize about how fun it would be to nurse a grudge in peace, or spend money without worrying about being a good steward of God's blessings, or just lie around in my bathrobe on Sunday morning.

But fantasy is all it is. Honestly, where else would I go? Like Peter, I know how exhausting and exasperating following Jesus can be. But I also know how exhilarating it is! I've never come across anyone else who infuriates, frustrates, and confuses me the way Jesus does. I've also never come across anyone else who inspires, encourages, astonishes, and delights me as he does either.

No one else places bigger demands upon my time. No one else sets higher goals for my life. No one else scares me as much as Jesus does. Following Jesus is risky. But no one else makes me feel safer. And nobody loves me the way Jesus loves me.

I've been given a peek behind the curtain. “I have seen the mountain top!” I've seen what being fully alive looks like; and I couldn't forget the experience, even if I wanted to. Jesus has ruined everything. And I'm afraid he has ruined me for good. So I'm right there with Peter, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

I know there are plenty of good reasons not to follow Jesus, and there are plenty of good reasons to give up on the Church. Believe me, I know. I'm a pastor. I've probably given you a few reasons of my own from time to time.

As far as I can tell, there's really only one good reason to stay with Jesus and stick around with this motley body of followers we call the Church. But, oh, what a reason it is! It's the reason Peter gives right after Jesus offended half of Capernaum with his sermon: “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Amen.